

# We Are Americans Now

by Jorge Gomez

Staff Writer

Becoming an American citizen is in some cases a mere legal affair. But for others, like Sgt. 1st Class Dawit Gebregiorgis, getting naturalized was the final embrace of an American cultural identity. He didn't always feel that way.

Gebregiorgis and his family moved to New York in 1983 from Eritrea during its armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia. The 8-year-old and his family left behind a life of goat herding, milking cows and very little schooling in northern East Africa for a better future in the United States. They eventually settled in San Diego where they found a larger Eritrean community.

Gebregiorgis said he was surrounded by other ethnicities in "the projects" of San Diego who didn't seem to welcome their north African origin.

"People don't have the education to understand why you are different, so there was less acceptance (of us), until we started learning English," he said.

His family didn't follow the social conventions of the community and that made them stand out.

"People would always remark about why we were so secret and never partake of community events," he said.

That may have been because they still felt like immigrants.

"I was in 'the land of milk and honey' and I could be a successful person here,

but I still didn't embrace the United States as my country yet," he said.

Soon they began to open up more to the community and make friends, but for Gebregiorgis there appeared to be a lingering barrier – his ethnicity.

"I wanted to fit in and be invited to certain things and not be perceived as the different one every time," he said.

Yet he never became ashamed of his cultural heritage.

"My parents taught me better than that.

I come from a very proud family. My father would sit us down every week and lecture us about why we were a proud race (the Habesha people)," he said.

Still, he wanted to fit in, but he was confused about what it meant to be in America while politics divided the Habesha people of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Then everything changed in his high school years.

"My father stated one day, 'We are Americans now, America gave you clothes, America gave you food, America gave you the opportunity to excel, don't blame anybody but yourself if you fail,'" he said.

Gebregiorgis embraced his father's declaration, but it didn't mean he would break from his Eritrean heritage.

"I would always be proud of my heritage but now my allegiance would be to the United States," he said.

He had reached a more mature understanding of himself, but he also



PHOTO BY JORGE GOMEZ

**Sgt. 1st Class Dawit Gebregiorgis with his pit bulls Gotti and Ricco.**

had a street identity.

"It's the easiest thing for a foreigner to fall into gangs," he said. "It's the only family, other than your family, that will accept you in society. You've always got a home, but in society you still need that acceptance of your peers."

Gebregiorgis wanted to cut himself off from the gang lifestyle and follow his father's military footsteps, so he joined the Army.

His first duty station was in North Carolina, where he faced a new cultural environment, namely, the South.

"I'm coming from the melting pot in New York and California where everyone gets along, but the South is totally different," he said. "White stays with white and black stays with black."

Despite his impression of racial

groupings in the region, he said he learned to adapt by making friends with everyone.

"I'm like a chameleon, I can fit in anywhere," he said. But he also credits the Army for helping to break racial stereotypes and prejudice, "because you are forced to work with each other and become one unit, one team."

Gebregiorgis came to embrace his identity as a Soldier, as a noncommissioned officer, and five years later in 2001, as an American citizen.

"It's easier for me to embrace an American identity because I'm in the military and away from the Eritrean community, but I do fall back on my roots when I go back home," he said.

"I still go home to an Eritrean family that still speaks Tigrinya and still eats the same food."

Now Gebregiorgis, an instructor with the Aerial Field and Services Department, draws from his experience with diversity as a leadership asset.

"In order to become a leader you have to know everyone's ups and downs, the way they think, what makes them tick," he said.

"You can't judge people by how they were raised, all you can do is educate them about cultural differences."

And for this airborne Soldier, the Army is the best place to learn about those differences.

*Note: "Pathways" highlights the paths Soldiers take as they steer through American culture in the U.S. Army.*